



CHALLENGES FOR PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The quality of education is part of the political agenda of most countries worldwide. The contemporary nature of the quality theme is related to a new program of social policies, that we believe corresponds to both a reduction of the political education field, and a need to legitimate the state. From an 'educator-state' we are evolving towards an 'evaluator-state'. After a description of the main measures that have been taken to improve the quality of education, the article enumerates four challenges, that the author considers relevant for dealing with the problem of educational quality with a social and political perspective.

Key-words: Evaluation, Education Quality, quality assurance, Evaluator-State

INTRODUCTION

This text seeks, firstly, to place the issue of education quality in the context of the evolution of educational policies in Portugal. Secondly, it describes a set of political measures that have been taken for promoting education quality. Finally, it lists a set of guidelines that could lead to education quality improvements in the years to come.

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THE POLITICAL RHETORIC ON EDUCATION QUALITY

The speech on the quality of education generally arises as an answer/a way out (although we don't really know to where) to the great amount of problems accumulated by the Portuguese educational systems, engaged with the democratization of the access to education and with the promotion of equal social opportunities for all. The school "sanctuary" was invaded (Dubet, 2004, p.19) – it receives today all citizens with all kind of inequalities and inherent social expectations. In face of this "invasion", in the last three decades the education policies have been regarding quality as the salvation, as the necessary and possible answer to all their problems.

Education quality can be considered, therein, a polysemeous concept which, historically, is imbedded in a multiplicity of policies for overcoming a multitude of problems. These problems may arise either from the success of socio-educational policies, the democratization of education, and the equality of opportunities, or from the accelerated technological, organizational and social changes that invaded western societies after the seventies in the XXth century. Thus, quality comprises a socio-political dimension, being a large social "platform" of political movements and labour unions, parents' associations and municipalities, teachers and students, governments and international organizations, struggling to promote academic (and educational) success for all.

International organizations have had, in this, as much as in other matters, an essential role in the establishment of the agenda concerning national educational policies (Adick, 1993; Azevedo, 2000; Meyer, Ramirez & Soysal, 1992; Nóvoa & Shriewer, 2000). OECD, for example, launched PISA (*Programme for International Student Assessment*), certainly the most well known international programme, aiming precisely to promote the knowledge and spreading of "the quality of learning results" (Schleicher, 2006: p. 23). Recently, in 2006, another international programme started, this one regarding the quality of schools: *Project of the development of value-added models in education systems* (OCDE/EDU/CERI). In 1990, UNESCO launched a large international programme of 'Quality Education for All' that led to a first Declaration in 1990, followed by the Dakar Platform for Action, in 2000.

The concerns with education quality in the political rhetoric of the European Union are also numerous. For example, at the very first lines of one EU report, it is stated that: "The quality of education and training is considered in all member states to be a concern of the highest political priority (European Commission, 2001: p. 5). The same report proposes a model of sixteen indicators for evaluating education quality. The general EU concerns with education quality was extended to the evaluation of schools, through the promotion of the European pilot project 'Evaluating quality in school education', and through the development of a number

of studies in all member states about the evaluation of schools (this was done through Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe). As far as higher education is concerned, we can mention, for example, the recommendation 98/561 EC, which deals with the cooperation among member states aiming to guarantee quality in higher education systems and the creation of ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, in 2000.

Education quality involves, therefore, curriculum, teaching-learning processes, teachers' training, schools' organization and equipment, youth professional qualification, academic results, school environment, school-local community involvement, school guidance, educational innovation, performance trends, assessment of schools and students, and it is strengthening social confidence in educational systems, which have to change and improve its obsolete organizational matrix that comes from the XVIIIth century (OCDE, 1992; Venâncio & Otero, 2003). Education quality goes beyond pedagogic issues, involving a congregation of a set of social expectancies around education.

In the last four decades educational policies on behalf of quality should be seen, first of all, as a fraction of the vast political and social programmes. It will be no longer possible to keep the pedagogic problems within the school walls, isolating them from social problems (Nóvoa, 1992). Indeed, we are in the presence of social policies that cross unquestionably school education, and whose implementation generates new social problems (in part, school problems). Movements such as 'the effective schools', 'the school improvement' and 'the school assertiveness' (Davis & Thomas, 1992; Murillo Torrecilla, 2003) must be seen under this perspective. However, they often lock themselves strictly within the school scope, while seeking to attain goals with greater social impact.

THE EMERGENCE OF EVALUATION AND OF THE STATE-EVALUATOR

Amongst all the attempts carried out for finding answers to the new social demands of education quality, perhaps the one with greatest impact up to now was evaluation, both at the international level as well as at the national and local levels, both in governments as well as in schools, in teachers, in parents and in society as a whole.

Among several measures on behalf of education quality, the evaluation of education quality was raised to the category of nuclear measure or mother-measure. In fact, evaluation, although being an instrument, is often regarded as an answer or even as *the answer*. Therefore, the belief that the persisting social and educational problems can be overcome by means of evaluation procedures is spreading quickly. Several governments perceive this fact as an additional reason to give a high political priority to evaluation.

The evaluation of schools has followed several routes, depending on the founding values and the perspective of analysis adopted. However, there is a general trend to transform the evaluation in a technical question, simplifying it and, thus, hiding its multiple meanings, purposes and processes.

The emergence of an State-Evaluator (Afonso, 2002, p.34; Costa, Mendes & Ventura, 2002, p.13) is one amongst several political expressions, in parallel with the rhetoric of schools autonomy, that reveals the need of States for social and political re-legitimation. External and internal evaluation, self and hetero-evaluation, national exams, school rankings, accountability, promotion of 'evaluation cultures' are some of the current expressions of this new feature of State action in the field of school education.

In Portugal, the political rhetoric on education quality was spread in the nineties, and accompanied by some real measures. At the end of the 90's and beginning of 2000's, the evaluation of schools and educational systems replaced, gradually, the speech about quality. In 2007, evaluation is among the priorities of the political agenda, whereas education quality became a residual element in that same agenda. The part takes the place of the whole, as if education quality was a problem of education evaluation, being disregarded a broader social and political vision on the educational phenomenon in today's complex societies, with all the subsequent risks.

PRINCIPAL MEASURES ON SCHOOL EVALUATION ADOPTED IN PORTUGAL (HIGHER AND NON-HIGHER EDUCATION)

In Portugal, experiences of systematic evaluation of schools are scarce. However, in the last years, some important initiatives were undertaken. Let's start by those referring to basic and secondary education. Among them, we can mention two kinds of initiatives: those set off by the State, generally through the Ministry of Education, and those set off by other entities through private initiatives. Let's start with the first ones:

- a) Education Quality Observatory ('Observatório da Qualidade da Educação') - an initiative created within the scope of the Programme Education for All (PEPT) ('Programa Educação para Todos'), between 1992 and 1999, which promoted the practice of self-evaluation in basic schools;
- b) Project Quality XXI ('Projecto Qualidade XXI') - developed by the Educational Innovation Institute, between 1999 and 2002, also focused on the establishment of schools' self-evaluation practices;
- c) Schools' Integrated Evaluation Programme ('Programa de Avaliação Integrada de Escolas') - created by the General Inspection of Education

(IGE) was put into practice between 1992 and 2002; it consisted on the application of a school external evaluation model coming from a central administration organism;

- d) The Portuguese Institute for Quality, which has been working not only on the evaluation of schools' quality, but also on other areas beyond education.
- e) The model of 'Effectiveness of Schools' Self-evaluation', created in 2005 under the responsibility of the General Inspectorate of Education (IGE), configures a methodology of meta-evaluation which deals with the assessment of self-evaluation practices carried out by schools.
- f) A new model of 'External Evaluation of Schools' led by the IGE started in 2006 and replaced the former model, suspended in 2002.

In what concerns private initiatives, we can refer to:

- a) The Secondary School Evaluation Programme (Programa de Avaliação de Escolas com Ensino Secundário – AVES), a programme for external evaluation of schools that promotes a value-added analysis of schools was initiated in 2000 by Manuel Leão Foundation;
- b) The project Quality Certification in Vocational Schools (Certificação da Qualidade nas Escolas Profissionais) for the development of a quality certification model for vocational education was active between 1997 and 2001 and was coordinated by the National Association of Vocational Schools (Associação Nacional das Escolas Profissionais – ANESPO);
- c) The project "Improving Quality" (Melhorar a Qualidade) was developed between 2000 and 2005 by the Private and Cooperative Educational Establishments Association (Associação dos Estabelecimentos do Ensino Particular e Cooperativo – AEEP), in collaboration with *QUAL* (a company that provides training and quality management services). This project had the purpose of establishing schools' self-evaluation dynamics, inspired in the model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM).

In addition to these evaluation initiatives, we shall also mention a set of legal measures, arising from the Ministry of Education:

- a) The System of Incentives for Education Quality, approved in 1993 by the Resolution 113/ME/93 of June 23rd;
- b) The Resolution 178-A/ME/93 of July 30th regarding pedagogic support;
- c) The Resolution 98-A/92, mentioning 'learning quality' and the improvement of the 'educational system quality' as goals of the evaluation system;
- d) The Decree-Law 115-A/98, establishing the regime of schools autonomy and management, and reinforcing the responsibilities of the management

- and administration boards of schools, namely through the development of tools for school performance evaluation that enable the improvement of the public education service;
- e) The Decree-Law 31/2002 of December 20th that establishes an evaluation system of education and non-higher schooling.

Five years after the approval of this last Decree-Law (31/2002), perhaps the more wide-ranging and noteworthy of all, has not yet been put to practice in what concerns the majority of its mechanisms and measures. In the meantime, many public and private schools, more or less aware of this set of initiatives, have been implementing very diverse self-evaluation dynamics, most of them still to be studied.

Although we do not wish to discuss in detail this issue, the emphasis of this legislation is more directed to the need of measuring and obtaining quantitative results, than to the search of new courses of action for the various social actors in education, in order to improve the actual education quality, in each school of each local community (Bolívar, 2000; Costa et al., 2002). In addition, legislative measures appear in cascade, without a proper assessment of their implications, and without a clear definition of the new way to follow and the social actors to be involved.

In any case, in Portugal, these measures are contemporaneous with a refusal of schools' autonomy by the centralising State (Lima, 2006), and with a weak conquest of autonomy by schools and their major protagonists. The desired social responsabilization for education demands for more participation of the interested parties in the evaluation of educational institutions, as well as the implementation of governmental policies with real implications in education quality improvement.

In higher education, the main reference is the Law 38/94 which regulates the 'national system of quality evaluation in higher education'. The evaluation practices include the assessment of higher education courses, along with self-evaluation procedures. However, the external evaluation of higher education institutions is practically incipient in Portugal. The Decree-law 205/98 of July 11th created the National Council for Higher Education Evaluation (Conselho Nacional de Avaliação do Ensino Superior – CNAVES), responsible for coordinating the evaluation of hundreds of higher education courses, both from public and private institutions, as well as universities and polytechnic institutes, in some cases in cooperation with other institutions¹. The Law 1/2003 of January 6th approves 'the juridical regime of higher education quality development', and finally, the Decree-Law 74/2006 of March 24th establishes the accreditation norms for institutes and courses of higher education.

¹ We highlight the agreements celebrated with the Association of Public Polytechnic Higher Institutes (Associação dos Institutos Superiores Politécnicos Públicos – ADISPOR) and with the Portuguese Association of Private Higher Education (Associação Portuguesa do Ensino Superior Privado – APESP).

Despite the paramount efforts in the evaluation of higher education courses, in the last ten years, Governments did not want to read the consequences (positive or negative) of this evaluation. In the meantime, many universities have been promoting self-evaluation processes, aiming at improving their performance and at developing internal dynamics in order to ease external evaluation processes. The Foundation for Science and Technology (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia – FCT), a State organization, implemented several years ago systematic practices for the evaluation of Research Centres that it recognises and finances.

In 2007, the Portuguese Government approved a legislative proposal regarding the legal framework for higher education evaluation, that aimed to create a modern evaluation system, consistent with the international best practices, where independent external evaluation is mandatory, and is the basis for the accreditation of the institutions and their courses (MCTES, 2007). This proposal will institutionalize internal evaluation practices of higher education institutions and will make external evaluation mandatory, to be carried out by an independent organization that should be created for this purpose. As noted by the Ministry, this legislative proposal is based on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, elaborated by the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA), and is a consequence of the report prepared (in 2006) by a panel of ENQA experts for Portugal. This report contains material recommendations 'on the organization, the method and the processes of a new evaluation and accreditation system' (ibidem).

In 2007, the Government also approved, for public consultation, a Decree-law that creates the Agency of Evaluation and Accreditation to Guarantee Higher Education Quality. This institution will act 'in a logic of rigour, impartiality and separation between evaluators and evaluated, as well as in a logic of obliging institutions to submit to the external evaluation processes (if institutions do not submit to this process they may lose their accreditation)' (ibidem).

This pathway, according to Santos (2001), reveals several potentialities for developing an evaluation system with quality and participation. At the same time it expresses several fragilities concerning the institutional evaluation (and not only the evaluation of courses or groups of courses), the embedding of an evaluation culture and continuous quality improvement, the creation of internal mechanisms of institutional quality evolution control, and the public credibility of evaluation processes.

This set of political measures for the evaluation of higher education institutions reinforces the perspective previously mentioned that the political speech is diluting itself in rhetoric and in evaluation practices of institutions and courses. Thus, it is very likely that this "locking up", inside the rhetoric of evaluation, hinders the political design of new processes for promoting higher education quality, as a socially relevant problem involving a multiplicity of social actors.

SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION EVALUATION

The quality of the educational public good is an ethical and social imperative. The higher the expectations of societies regarding education and the more they promote economies based on knowledge (see, for example, the European Union Heads of State decision at the Lisbon Council, in 2000), the more emphasis is given to the evaluation issue of education policies, as outlined above.

We consider, as many other authors, that institutional evaluation is relevant both politically and socially, but it needs to obey to a set of basic criteria: (i) it should be properly contextualized (Santos Guerra, 2001); (ii) it should take into account the processes and not only the results (Alaíz, Góis & Gonçalves, 2003; Scheerens, 2004); (iii) it should be participative and give voice to the different actors working and interacting with school institutions; (iv) it should be shaped by values of educational improvement, both in its conception and in its processes and results, since evaluation itself must be a learning process at the service of more and better education for all; (v) it should not be based only on quantitative methods but use several methods to reflect and analyse reality; (vi) nobody, namely the external evaluators, should be privileged in the evaluation enquiry; the evaluation process should be analysed by all interested parties; (vii) it should be formative and aim at improving educational practices and students academic and educational results, by means of decision-taking by the several parties involved. (Marchesi & Martín, 1999; Perrenoud, 2003).

In conclusion, we describe some challenges that can be put forth to the improvement of educational evaluation (of schools and educational systems), still using as main reference the particular case of Portugal.

1. To make educational evaluation evolve from a logic deeply dependent on a centralised and ultra-regulator State (now, also an State-evaluator) to a participated social process, where the State should redefine its role, involving other social actors, in favour of the enhancement of education quality in every school. The question of schools' autonomy should walk side by side with the evaluation issue, since what is at stake is an evaluation that reinforces the quality of education, the research-action practices, and the socio-community participation and regulation (Azevedo, 2007).
2. To reflect about these questions in the public domain and to search and build new institutional evaluation procedures (schools' self and hetero evaluation), escaping from administrative and bureaucratic centralism, and favouring not only diverse evaluation practices (there are not equal institutions with equal programmes of self-evaluation and social performance improvement), but also the reinforcement of social

responsibilization for education processes and results (involving teachers, students, parents and other interested parties), as well as the direct and concrete implication of the interested parties in the quest for education improvement.

3. To avoid the spreading of disconnected evaluation measures based on the collection of un-contextualized elements (for example, the creation of school rankings based only on the results of students' national exams), emphasising the dissemination of more socially participated self-evaluation practices, along with rigorous and independent external evaluation procedures, developed within a political context that really promotes the autonomy and the social responsabilization of all interested parties.
4. To invest more in the training of teachers specialized on institutional evaluation and in the creation of meta-evaluation instruments, in order to establish the evaluation practices as a means (amongst others) at the service of education quality improvement.

After decades of educational reforms, that not always resulted in significant improvements in education quality and school performance, it is urgent to guarantee that today's political and social pressure in favour of evaluation does not increase the permanent carousel of changes, and does not reinforce routines and conservative practices, but instead contributes to the improvement of professional practices, to a greater socio-community involvement for more and better education for all, and for an authentic institutional improvement.

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Resumo

A qualidade da educação está na agenda política de quase todos os países. Esta actualidade da temática da qualidade inscreve-se num novo "programa" das políticas sociais, que consideramos corresponder quer a uma redução do campo político da educação quer a uma necessidade de legitimação do Estado. Do Estado-Educador estamos a evoluir para um Estado-avaliador. Após uma descrição das principais medidas tomadas em prol da qualidade da educação escolar, enumeram-se quatro desafios que o autor considera pertinentes para equacionar com qualidade social e política o problema da qualidade escolar.

Palavras-chave: Avaliação, qualidade da educação, quality assurance, Estado-avaliador

